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Premier's Advisory Panel On Literacy

Literacy and Lifelong Learning in BC: A Legacy of Leadership

Final Report

"Despite our best efforts, there remains an urgent need for bold actions if British Columbia is to become the most literate jurisdiction in North America. The challenge before the Provincial government is to lead this action so that it embraces a diverse complexity of inter-related strategies within the context of a coherent Provincial literacy framework, supported by an increased magnitude of investment and accountability."

(Interim Report February 2005, page 1)

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April 3, 2006

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1. Introduction

The Premier's Panel on Literacy began its work in November, 2004 and issued its Interim Report on February 21, 2005, Literacy And Lifelong Learning in BC: A Legacy Of Leadership.

The Panel's mandate was to:

- *Define the problem: assess the current situation and identify the nature and scope of the literacy challenges and issues in British Columbia, including a description of the groups and communities whose unmet needs are the greatest*

- *Develop an approach: working in partnership with Literacy BC, Literacy Now and communities throughout the province, make recommendations to the Premier on a literacy strategy that builds capacity, forges intersections, and increases the profile for the issue, while indicating priorities for potential future investments in British Columbia*

2. The Provincial Government's Response To The Panel's Interim Report

The Panel recognizes and acknowledges the actions of the Premier and the Provincial government over the past 13 months in listening to the Panel's Interim Report and beginning to act upon the recommendations contained in that Report.

In particular, the Panel wants to note and affirm:

- The decision by the Premier to delegate the overall Provincial government leadership role on literacy and lifelong learning to the Ministry of Education

- The formation of the Legislature's Standing Committee On Education, with a direct focus on adult literacy and specific literacy strategies to improve literacy rates among Aboriginal people, English as a Second Language adults and Seniors

- The creation of a senior level Literacy Unit within the Ministry of Education

- The work of the inter-ministerial committee on literacy

- The work of the Deputy Ministers of the Social Ministries, focusing on the literacy needs of at risk groups

- The work of the Ministry of Advanced Education in reviewing the adult literacy strategy, programs and funding arrangements

- The ongoing work of Literacy Now to support community-based literacy planning across the province[1]

- The work underway by the Literacy Unit in developing a Provincial Literacy Plan for government

- The willingness of senior staff of the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education to enter into a dialogue with the Panel

- The major challenges in creating and maintaining effective collaboration across Provincial Ministries on literacy issues

3. Literacy: An Essential Issue For All

The Panel believes that action must be accelerated and that literacy must have a much higher priority within the Provincial government, the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education and other ministries[2]. Immediate and strong Provincial leadership, action and momentum are essential if we are to meet the overall goal of British Columbia becoming the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.

Literacy is an essential issue. It is a first step, a basic building block, for each person in British Columbia to successfully engage in formal and informal education, personal and professional development, lifelong learning and active citizenship.

There is much that we can be proud of in the:

- Achievements of all British Columbians in literacy, education and lifelong learning

- Commitments of parents to ensure that their children and young people have the resources and experiences they need to develop naturally and fully

- Development of diverse, formal and informal literacy, education and lifelong learning programs and resources by public, non profit and private agencies across the province

- Accomplishments within school districts of increased literacy outcomes in the early years

- Actions by some employers to provide learning opportunities for their staff

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[1] While the Panel believes that collaborative planning, acting, innovating and learning at community and regional levels is essential; it does not believe that this, even if well funded, is sufficient to achieve the goal of British Columbia becoming the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent. Government must set and facilitate an overall framework and facilitate collaboration at all levels.

[2] Including the Ministries of Health, Attorney General, Child and Family Development, Intergovernmental Relations, Employment and Income Assistance, and Economic Development.

- Increasing collaborative work at community and regional levels involving public, non profit and private agencies

These are strengths to build on.

4. The Compelling Case For Literacy And Literacy Action

The Panel believes that there is a compelling and multi-faceted case for expanding the literacy competencies and achievements of all British Columbians and, for significant and urgent action and investment on literacy issues.

In its February 2005 Interim Report, the Panel noted that:

- *Literacy is a surprisingly widespread issue, affecting all British Columbians*

- *BC's economic performance depends on the literacy competencies of its citizens. Our economic enterprises cannot be innovative, productive and competitive in a global economy without a well trained and adaptable work force*

- *Literacy competencies and challenges influence labour market supply and demand. We will not address our issues of unemployment and under-employment without focusing on literacy competencies and challenges*

- *Literacy competencies and challenges affect our health, quality of life and incomes of all people in this province. Health and quality of life are shaped by incomes and education. Incomes are shaped by people's literacy competencies and educational levels*

- *Many people, in our criminal justice, addictions, unemployment, social and health service systems, face literacy challenges that prevent them from living normal lives and escaping cycles of being at risk. We will not be able to consistently and effectively assist these people without integrating literacy and learning programs into our approaches*

- *There are particular segments of British Columbian society who are dramatically affected by literacy issues, including: children who do not have access to the resources they need to develop naturally, young people who fall behind or drop out of schools, people living in poverty and with low incomes, seniors, persons with disabilities, immigrants and refugees, Aboriginal communities, and older, economically dislocated workers. All of us are affected if we neglect to act with and on behalf of these people*

- *Many people in British Columbia want to learn, raise their educational levels and address their literacy challenges and competencies. They can only do this well if there are literacy and learning resources that are accessible, affordable and responsive. We do not have such a coherent and integrated system of best practice literacy resources across the province. Too often, other issues such as lack of child care and transportation and government policies, create barriers to people's learning and literacy development*

5. What Matters: The Next Decade

In its Interim Report, the Panel stated six principles and eight recommendations[3] that it believed essential to guide Provincial government actions on literacy issues. The Panel continues to stand firmly behind these principles and recommendations and the need for leadership and immediate action.

(a) Principles

- *Position literacy as an issue for all of us: Literacy is a complex issue. It needs to be seen as a thread, weaving through all aspects of people's lives – their families, work, learning and communities. Low literacy levels negatively and painfully impact individuals, their families and our communities*

- *Link literacy to lifelong learning: Literacy is not a "now you are done" issue. There is no point at which you become "literate". Many British Columbians have low literacy competencies. Many other British Columbians are functionally literate, but need to deepen their skills and knowledge, recoup the skills that they have lost through under-use and expand their competencies, in the context of constant change*

- *Take a collaborative approach: In developing and implementing the Strategic Action Framework for Literacy, the focus must be on both individual and collective responsibility and on acting together in a collaborative manner. Government must foster, facilitate, support and model such collaboration, at all levels*

- *Build on strengths and existing capacities: Action on literacy must be built on the assets of individual British Columbians and their families and communities and on the strengths of our existing organizations and services that support literacy development and lifelong learning*

- *Overcome the "knowing-doing" gap: Much is already known about best practices in the literacy field, the gaps in services and the integrated approaches required by diverse learners. We do not need to re-invent the wheel. However, we do need to implement this knowledge well*

- *Support individual initiative: We can encourage young people, parents and adults to proactively and responsibly act on their own behalf, and on behalf of their children, friends, and neighbours. However, the necessary services must be in place and the barriers to learning must be removed*

[3] The Panel reviewed the recommendations made in numerous previous studies and consultations and offered an initial set of action recommendations for the short, medium and long terms.

(b) Recommendations

- *Ramp up the Provincial government's leadership around literacy and lifelong learning, at both political and civil service levels*
- *Construct an overall Strategic Action Framework for Literacy (outcomes, policies and strategies) to guide the work of all public and publicly funded agencies and to provide leadership to the entire literacy field*
- *Require outcome-based accountability, linked to the Strategic Action Framework for Literacy, in all public and publicly funded literacy and learning agencies and service systems*
- *Delegate a single lead Ministry or agency accountable for progress within the overall literacy framework of outcomes, policies and strategies*[4]
- *Strengthen inter-ministerial collaboration, under the direction of the lead Ministry or agency*
- *Develop coherent literacy and learning strategies and action plans for children (birth to Grade 3), young people (grade 4 – 12) and adults*[5]
- *Build public awareness and engage public support*
- *Increase the magnitude of investment in literacy development and learning from the Provincial government and from other sources such as the private sector*

6. Action Recommendations: The Immediate Future

In reviewing the response from the Provincial government to its Interim Report, the Panel makes the following recommendations for priority action.

(a) Investments

The Panel believes that the goal of becoming the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent will not happen without significantly increased and ongoing investments in both public and community approaches.

The Panel recommends that the Provincial government annually invest $35 million in literacy grant funds, coordinated through the Literacy Unit of the Ministry of Education to support:

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[4] The Panel acknowledges that the Premier has implemented this recommendation.

[5] The Panel believes that taking a life stage approach to developing literacy strategies, actions and investments makes the most sense.

- Ongoing community and regional planning on literacy issues through Literacy Now ($5 million annually)

- Innovation in literacy development approaches in public schools from Kindergarten to Grade 12 ($5 million annually, the present Literacy Innovation grants in the Ministry of Education)

- Local community and regional service innovation, development, delivery and infrastructure development, through community and regional public and non profit agencies, focusing on adults, families and their children ($25 million annually) including the work of Literacy BC as the provincial leader within the literacy community

Currently, the investment is $1.4 million annually, the lowest annual investment in Canada, implemented through the Ministry of Advanced Education's Community Adult Literacy Grants program. The level of $25 million annually would take British Columbia to one of the highest per capita investments in community literacy. It would accelerate action and momentum towards achieving the goal of BC becoming the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.

This new investment must be in addition to the current Provincial government investment in literacy and learning through various ministries and public service systems[6].

This new investment needs to be coordinated through the Literacy Unit of the Ministry of Education to ensure continuity and accountability within the overall Strategic Action Framework for Literacy. The Ministries of Education and Advanced Education would need to work together to create the most cost-effective means of making decisions about the annual $25 million for community and regional initiatives. The Ministry of Advanced Education has extensive experience with its current Community Adult Literacy Grants program.

Projects within this $25 million should be funded for two to three year periods to ensure best practice development, delivery, outcomes and evaluation.

(b) Framework For Action

The Panel recommends that the Provincial government make the development of a Strategic Action Framework for Literacy (outcomes, policies and strategies for literacy development and lifelong learning in BC) an urgent and top priority. Without a bold Framework, current actions and investments will continue to be fragmented at all levels.

(c) Ongoing Research Agenda

Action on literacy requires paying attention to best practices to ensure solid information, sound investment decisions and monitoring progress at all levels.

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[6] For example: Ministry of Education, school districts, Ministry of Advanced Education, colleges and universities.

The Panel recommends that the Provincial government support an ongoing research agenda aimed at:

- Mapping all current literacy services and public investments
- Identifying gaps in services and investments
- Identifying those places where people "fall into the cracks"
- Developing evidence-based, qualitative and quantitative benchmarks for measuring progress against the overall literacy action framework[7]

This research agenda is essential in ensuring that increased funds invested in literacy action and service delivery are focused where they are most needed and that everyone benefits from the different innovations and development projects across the province.

(d) Premier's Literacy Council

The work of the current Premier's Advisory Panel on Literacy comes to a close with this Final Report. However, the Panel believes that there is an invaluable role for an ongoing external and independent body, appointed by the Premier.

The Panel recommends that the Premier appoint a Premier's Literacy Council, with a mandate to:

- Advise the Premier, Ministers and Ministries on literacy issues
- Review and comment on all provincial government plans related to literacy
- Carry out independent research
- Monitor the progress against the Strategic Action Framework for Literacy
- Create an annual public report on the state of literacy in British Columbia and the progress toward the goal of becoming the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent
- Consult with a broad base of stakeholders in the literacy community and beyond
- Meet semi-annually with the Deputy Ministers of the Social Ministries and with the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Literacy

[7] The development of the benchmarks needs to be a partnership project involving the Premier's Literacy Council and different Provincial Ministries.

The Council membership should be diverse and reflect:

- Geography, gender, cultural background, age, socio-economic class and Aboriginal perspectives
- Knowledge, skills and experience in different aspects of the literacy field[8] and in government coordination and policy frameworks
- Influence in different aspects of the literacy community
- Passion and commitment to literacy issues

The Council will require an annual operational budget and staff if it is to be effective and remain independent.

7. Leadership And Action: Coordination, Innovation, Policy Change, And Investment

There is a desire for change and action on literacy issues within local communities and regions and within the Provincial government and its ministries.

The Panel is convinced that without both strong Provincial government action, developing and investing in an overall Strategic Action Framework for Literacy, and equally strong, local community and regional action, developing plans, identifying gaps in service and barriers to learning, and acting, we will not achieve the goal of becoming the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.

Coordination, innovation and policy change must happen at all levels and across all parts of our communities and society.

This means that the Provincial government must:

- Develop an overall Strategic Action Framework for Literacy (outcomes, policies and strategies) to guide the actions of all public and publicly funded agencies
- Create a much greater and more focused long term investment plan to implement this Framework
- Identify and change the government policies that are barriers to individual learning and to community and regional action

[8] Particularly, the three life cycle stages: birth to Grade 3, Grade 4 – 12 and adults.